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The representation of women in video games: a comparative analysis between Tomb Raider and the Horizon saga

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of female protagonists in video games by conducting a comparative analysis of Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider series and Aloy from Horizon series. The study investigates the evolutionary changes in the portrayal of these characters and their relationship with contemporary social imaginaries and sensitivities. The article adopts a theoretical framework that combines perspectives from social imaginaries and media studies. The research methodology involves analyzing the narrative storytelling, body representations, and costume design of the characters. The findings highlight the transformations in the depiction of Lara Croft over time, from a hypersexualized damsel in distress to a more complex and empowered character. In the case of Aloy, her representation challenges traditional beauty standards and incorporates imperfections, reflecting an evolving societal acceptance. The study emphasizes the reciprocal influence between societal changes and representations in video games, highlighting the role of these media in shaping collective imaginations.

Keywords: Video games, Female representation, Social Imaginary

Video games, as a medium, have the capacity to incorporate and amalgamate characteristics and elements from other media such as films, TV series, books, and comics. Simultaneously, they offer novel interactive ways of experiencing storytelling in a virtual environment.

In just over 60 years, the gaming industry has become one of the most significant and lucrative, representing a substantial portion of the entertainment products market on its own. It has evolved across various consoles and modes of gameplay, sometimes complementary and sometimes distinctly separate (Rickards, 2020). The evolutionary trajectory of the medium has encompassed many aspects, from graphical rendering to narrative complexity.

Despite their initially simplistic graphics, arcade games and early video game products provided avenues for developing ingenuity, perseverance, and physical coordination. However, there soon arose a demand for new stimuli driven by more complex, nuanced, and mature narratives. Attention shifted towards structured missions akin to those found in audio-visual productions.

This transformation is evident when considering one of the most memorable titles in gaming history, Mario Bros. The trophy, which players aimed to achieve, materialized in the form of the digital body of Princess Peach (Super Mario Bros,

1985), preceded by Pauline (Donkey Kong, 1981), albeit less memorably. Peach embodied the narrative archetype of the "damsel in distress" (Leonzi, 2010), serving as an objective rather than a playable character. The iconic Italian plumber overcame obstacles to rescue his beloved from the clutches of the dreaded Bowser. Notably, the cinematic adaptation of this game made a different choice regarding the fate of the Princess. Arcade games, particularly during those years, remained predominantly aimed at a male audience, leading to scholarly observations characterizing the gaming world's imagery as highly sexist (Summers, Miller, 2014).

Attention to storyline and character development, alongside the construction of increasingly elaborate game worlds, became paramount. However, the presence of female characters largely perpetuated the damsel in distress archetype, almost becoming a stereotype. The case of "The Legend of Zelda" is illustrative, where the true protagonist of the adventure is the warrior Link, not the princess who lends her name to the game.

Today, it becomes imperative to examine the evolution of representations of female protagonists and the connections these visions maintain with contemporary social imaginary.

Theoretical Framework

Given the sociological implications associated with the consumption of the subject medium, such as the emergence and development of communal practices, linguistic phenomena (Romano & Conti, 2014; Urraci, 2012), and psychological aspects like identity projection and the construction of an alternative self (Triberti & Argeton, 2013), it is deemed pertinent to identify the representations within video games as a field of primary importance.

This contribution represents a theoretical and methodological attempt to blend perspectives on social imagery (Castoriadis, 1975) with media studies, particularly those focusing on the analysis of gender representations in audio-visual and/or textual products.

The concept of social imaginry is a relatively recent research trajectory that conceives everyday reality as the result of collective imaginative action (Marzo & Mori, 2019). It allows for disengagement from the dichotomy (largely modern, contemporary, and Western) that opposes the terms "reality" and "imaginary," enabling the observation of social phenomena that might otherwise be overlooked.

In the words of Pier Luca Marzo, social imaginary is:

"the phantasmic form of reality created by the imagination of collective consciousness, which regulates and integrates individual imagination into social life, prefiguring the background of meaning for its mental activity and action: this spectral form of the world is more than the sum of the parts through which it is expressed..." (Marzo & Mori, 2019, p. 39)¹.

From this perspective, cultural products can be conceived as crystallizations of imaginaries, collective ideas, worldviews, and daily practices (cf. Tramontana, 2019). Not only do video games originate from a specific social imagery that

¹ All the quotations included in the text are taken from the Italian version of the books. The translations were done by the authors.

conveys certain ideas and representations, but they themselves, in a feedback process (which also concerns the specific ways in which they are experienced and consumed), contribute to the metamorphosis of the social imagery, actively participating in the change of collective ideas and contemporary sensibilities.

Specifically, with Gender and Media Studies (Goffman, 1959; Gill, 2008, 2009), one can grasp "the unintentional complexity of cultural texts" that inevitably incorporate "male or female models that will influence the tastes, attitudes, and behaviors - in other words, the identity definition - of boys and girls" (Gavrila, 2020).

In this sense, it is useful to recall the scientific contributions that have questioned the representation of women and analyzed the advertising (Papakristo, 2013) or television (Buonanno, 1983; 2013; 2014; Silverstone, 1994; D'Amato, 2007) context and consider these representations as manifest elements of the social imagery under study.

The perspective of social imagery allows for understanding the social processes related to the body and its representation. The body, understood as a point of convergence between biological elements and processes of social construction (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1966), is daily traversed by political demands and the dimension of power (Bourdieu, 1998), which determine its expressive capabilities and possibilities. Not surprisingly, some theories developed within feminist thought have identified the corporeal dimension "as the primary site of domination" (Meo, 2012, p. 61).

As Giomi and Magaraggia aptly highlighted, the medium of video games is certainly not neutral, relying on specific representations of women and the female body (Giomi, Magaraggia, 2017).

Method

To address the research question, those products within the gaming landscape featuring female protagonists and exhibiting a progressive change in their representation were selected. The choice fell upon one of the icons of gaming history: Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider saga. However, it was necessary to consider her debut in the gaming world in 1996, anchoring her characterization to her specific socio-cultural context. Thus, a selection was made to identify an element that could contrast with the past, describing a complete temporal arc capable of addressing contemporary issues. Given the expansion of the Sony PlayStation universe, the choice was made to focus on the new icon of the same production house: Aloy, the protagonist of the video games Horizon Zero Dawn and Horizon Forbidden West. Through the characterization of these two heroines, it appears possible to identify two points within a still-expanding representational evolution.

Based on these considerations, a corpus of analysis was composed, consisting of the video games in which both protagonists feature. However, parallel consideration was given to products created for other media.

The Tomb Raider saga consists of twelve chapters, divisible based on the year of release and the type of narrative and graphical development. Furthermore, these products offer a cross-media overview in the representation of its heroine. Lara Croft is the protagonist of three audiovisual products that have influenced her gaming

realization. During our analysis, these works were renamed with the term "portrait" to imply the "portraits" that have been provided over time of their protagonist.

In a comparative perspective, as previously mentioned, the heroine of "Horizon Zero Dawn" and "Horizon Forbidden West" was also selected. Aloy is a character of enormous fame and has quickly become one of the most important symbols of the production house.

Despite the different number of products in which they feature, Lara and Aloy represent a fertile object of study that allows for observing the temporal evolution of the representation of women in video games.

The study method involved the elaboration of a content analysis form, with the following parameters: storytelling analysis (subject/object of violence; details of her past and correspondence to a narrative archetype), body representations, and clothing representations.

Specifically, the analysis moved using studies on the structure of the fairy tale proposed by Propp (1928) and Greimas (2000), which were subsequently reworked on the hero's journey analysis proposed first by Campbell (1984) and then by Vogler (1992); focusing, finally, on the feminist reinterpretation by Maureen Murdock (2010) in order to position our heroines within specific attantial and archetypal roles (Neumann, 1955).

The content analysis method (Losito, 1993) was used to investigate the construction of the character's background and storyline. It was decided to code the variables "violence" and "background" based on the development of the game's plot. In particular, regarding "violence," a scale of 1-3 was used: where "1" stands for "active subject of violence," specifying that for most of the gameplay, the protagonist exhibits violent behavior; "2" indicates a "passive subject of violence," coding plots in which she is more subject to receiving it; finally, "3" to indicate a storytelling that emphasizes, with greater emphasis, the violence suffered by the protagonist, showing its character implications to a greater extent. Regarding the variable on "background," the complexity of the character's development was analyzed using a scale of 1-5, where "1" corresponds to the least developed and "5" shows the extreme complexity and articulation of information about the protagonist.

Considering subsequently the body as an area crossed by processes of social construction and the dimension of power, it was decided to use phenomenological observation (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1966) for the analysis of Lara and Aloy's digital bodies.

The type of clothing is also considered as a vector of stereotyped or sexist representations (cf. Nucera, 2014). It was decided to use a scale from 1-5 for the evaluation of body dimension and related clothing, where "1" stands for a stereotyped or sexualized representation and "5" stands for representations that do not meet stereotypes or strong sexualizations; in order to identify the issues of the first hyper-sexualized representations of the character, up to the most recent ones.

Results of the Research

Lara Croft and the Tomb Raider Series

In the first video game, Lara has a shallow narrative background (1), and her digital body is characterized by very pronounced forms, along with a decidedly sexualized and inappropriate attire for the setting. Lara navigates dangerous environments, jungles, caves, and tombs wearing a simple t-shirt and very short shorts. The camera angles mostly focus on her back, with the character's movements observed from behind for almost the entire duration of gameplay. This aspect, not only related to third-person gameplay mechanics but also carries an intriguing implication. It's noticeable how the "horizon line" is shifted downward, almost implicitly emphasizing a focus on the buttocks. Following Maureen Murdock's heroine's journey, we can emphasize how throughout her first narrative arc, Lara Croft acts like a man. She symbolizes those girls who, during their growth, "decide to identify with charm, prestige, authority, independence, and money controlled by men" (2010, p.25). There's the classic call to adventure that every hero follows, and if it weren't for her attire and figure, Lara would conform entirely to "male" action. The video games of the "first phase" (1996-2000) all maintain this representational line.

Significant changes can be observed with the onset of the "second phase," which includes the first film adaptations and the video games of the new trilogy (2001-2008). First and foremost, Lara's body undergoes a profound graphical re-styling, partly due to the cinematic representation and the interpretation by Angelina Jolie, a true Hollywood female icon of the time. In the movies, indeed, we witness an ambivalent process. On one hand, the character finally enjoys a more in-depth characterization and a much more complex personal story, developing relatable motivations and a more articulated psychology; on the other hand, there remains a strong sexualization and stereotyping, with a strong visual focus on Lara/Angelina's body shapes. Here, however, seems to begin a process of change that contrasts with the purely sexualized representation of previous products. Another paradoxical effect is that an imaginary character finds a new physical appearance in a real person, later adopted in the new Lara's modeling in the video game trilogy from 2006 to 2008. This very video game trilogy represents one of the central cores in analyzing Lara's evolution: here, her narrative arc shifts from "the search for paternal approval" to a representation more akin to that of the femme fatale. In addition to her military skills, both in video games and films, Lara uses her body to be deadly. We are thus in a true intermediate phase where the characterization of the protagonist seems to transcend the descriptive barriers of a single narrative archetype. The complex relationship with her father, the search for his approval, as well as the need to save him, are all present. The heroine, in this phase, faces her demons, lives a complex relationship with her father, oscillating between his approval and the need to save him, is amid action and adventure, but her body continues to be the main attractive feature of her actions.

A new and significant phase of the representational evolution of the Tomb Raider series is undoubtedly noticeable with the latest video game trilogy (2013-2018) and the related film starring Alicia Vikander (2018). The 2013 reboot constituted a drastic

change in Lara's representation, who here assumes a physiognomy that completely breaks with past aesthetics. The physical shapes are decidedly less accentuated, and the game camera's focus does not concentrate on them. Likewise, the clothing also changes, outfitting Lara with more suitable and consistent attire for the narrative and environmental context. Beyond a simplifying and hyper-sexualized representation, it seems here that the video game product wants to overcome a vision merely focused on the protagonist as a "sexual object" to re-contextualize her in a more complex, coherent, and profound narrative. In previous video games (especially the early ones), Lara had always been depicted in very scanty clothing that accentuated exaggerated and sexualized forms, without offering actual coherence with the given setting (treacherous and cold caves, snowy passages, etc.). Now, this dynamic has been completely rearticulated, outfitting Lara with clothing suitable for the setting (snow jackets, etc.). The narrative aspect has also undergone a strong paradigmatic change, proposing a new origin story for Lara, endowing her with deeper motivations. However, this type of representation also presents significant issues, particularly in the first video game of the new trilogy. Despite the new features that give Lara virtuous elements, ambivalent episodes persist. Lara, especially in the first phase of this product, becomes a true "subject of violence," offering the player a voyeuristic perspective on her pain. One can even witness a presumed attempted rape during a cutscene (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gB0_jFv634M). The violence that, in this phase, our heroine is forced to endure seems necessary to reconnect with her deeper self. This narrative choice, however, is undoubtedly a sociological element of primary importance, as a vector of fundamental information about representations of female power. It seems problematic to think that one must go through the desecration of the body to reconnect with one's femininity. Violence thus seems to become an archetypal element for the reconnection with one's femininity. Following the narrative points of this character according to the heroine's journey, we can place Lara in the narrative role of healing from her wounds.

Aloy and Contemporary Representation

While with Lara Croft we experience a significant change in female representation within the gaming context, with Aloy, we encounter a character born in a cultural context already attentive to dynamics of exclusion and stereotyping.

From the outset (2017), Aloy presents a well-developed psychology and a non-stereotypical visual representation, with non-canonical beauty standards. However, it is with the release of Horizon Forbidden West that the most interesting processes occur (2021). Here, Aloy undergoes a change in polygonal modeling, presenting a rounder face and an ultra-realism that also includes bodily details such as facial hair. This process can be seen as a sort of humanization of the character which, not coincidentally, also undergoes further changes in her psychology. From being an outcast in the first title, Aloy becomes a heroine of primary importance for her community and presents human traits of imperfection that do not undermine the gaming narrative, which instead gains renewed strength precisely because of these elements. It is interesting to note that the new modeling of the character has sparked strong discussions among fans and enthusiasts, dividing opinions into two contrasting factions: those criticizing the developers for making Aloy rounder and

including details like facial hair, and those highlighting the positivity of these changes or additions (<https://www.everyeye.it/notizie/horizon-forbidden-west-aloy-peli-volto-assurda-polemica-twitter-570460.html>). Such resistances and criticisms can be read as symptoms of an actual contrast between sensitivities and imaginations that show the effective presence, within the contemporary context, of opposing demands. In this sense, the video game product can be considered as the vector of a specific social imaginary, and this must be investigated as a process of feedback. The video game, a crystallization of a social imaginary (cfr. Tramontana, 2019), contributes to modifying (or at least problematizing) a certain type of female representations.

Aloy's identity, despite the various phases of reaffirmation, is well-present and integrated with the environment in which the protagonist lives. The camera angles emphasize this aspect during gameplay because they are more focused on capturing her relationship with nature rather than her curves. In this phase of analysis, it is interesting to underline how precisely these aspects have allowed the great acceptance of the character within popular culture. Vanity Fair, a fashion magazine, dedicated the cover of one of its issues in 2022 to her, with an editorial reflecting on the "revolution" of female representations brought about by this character (<https://www.vanityfair.it/article/aloy-eroina-horizon-forbidden-west-videogioco-seconda-stagione-intervista-creatori>). Her more realistic forms and the strong attention to her psychology make her appear as a nuanced character less close to possible narrative archetypes, representing almost a uniqueness. Her beauty is not canonical, and action takes place regardless of her gender. Furthermore, on the launch of the new chapter, an installation was dedicated to her in Florence; an artistic product that allowed her to transcend mere ludic form (https://www.corriere.it/tecnologia/22_febbraio_17/a-firenze-statua-aloy-videogioco-horizon-forbidden-west-omaggio-eroine-italiane-f5f4a55c-8ff9-11ec-990d-642ea57e6940.shtml).

Conclusions

In conclusion, starting from our initial desire to investigate the change in representations of female protagonists in the video game medium, Ci troviamo di fronte ad un rapporto di reciprocità. Cultural production is a product of the society in which it arises, but it also influences its aspects in return: "both cultural objects and the people who create and receive them do not operate in a vacuum but are anchored to a specific context" (Griswold, 1994, p.30).

The changes made to the design, as well as to Lara Croft's story, mark the productive need to meet new needs in the audience. As society changes, so does female representation, bringing the narrative to deeper and less stereotypical levels. Points within her narrative arc have been identified that testify to this change. Camera angles, clothing, and events characterizing her femininity change. Violence, initially an end, becomes a means to define her actions.

Similarly, Aloy becomes a keystone for intercepting attempts at change coming from the cultural product itself. Through changes in her design, the desire to represent a woman closer to reality is evident. However, these changes have not been

accepted by a portion of the audience, which has rejected that type of representation. The change in representation, in this way, is perceived by some in the community as almost forced, which reflects a certain difficulty in accepting this type of model. On the other hand, Aloy's approach to the tangible world makes her a symbol capable of traversing different means of communication. Her presence on the cover of *Vanity Fair* underlines the influence that new technologies are having within our society.

Lara Croft and Aloy, therefore, can be defined as narrative elements anchored to the era in which they were born, swallowed up by what ideally the public may or may not want. An apparently evolving path, but one that still carries with it all those elements of contradiction that, to this day, represent our society. Our present is characterized by an identity crisis, and this is also reflected in its images, still too faded to be fully embraced.

The twelve chapters of Lara, in this sense, are emblematic for delineating a path that reaches a new turning point in Sony Playstation's home: in Lara, it is possible to identify the attempt to intercept a predominantly male gamer, ready to play with a female character to "undress" her through her story.

On the other hand, with Aloy's presence, we can identify elements of acceptance, but at the same time, dissent. Signs of how cultural products are nothing more than mirrors of a society that does want to change but still doesn't know in which direction. Consequently, in this reciprocity, we are not yet ready for the total acceptance of the influence of a new female model.

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